

Sing what is well made

Yeats Poetry Prizes 2021



WB YEATS SOCIETY OF NY
National Arts Club
15 Gramercy Park South
New York NY 10003
YeatsSociety.nyc

We received entries from forty-three states and from seventeen countries. The competition was judged anonymously (the judge didn't know the names or locations of any entrants). Coincidentally, three of the six honorees are from Massachusetts and five are women.

REPORT OF THE JUDGE

There were almost 600 entries for the 2021 Yeats Poetry Prize. I read what I received as the pandemic raged and then abated, as I moved from Europe to the U.S., and began a new post in Jackson Heights, New York City.

Yeats said: "Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people." His poetry did. That maxim applies to the poems I selected: the two winners and four honorable mentions. The poems "Wildlife" and "Check's, Almost Every Night" speak in the language of the people. "Wildlife" has some of Hopkins and Bishop in sound and strut, comically comparing the bird world to the human world. "Check's, Almost Every Night," is a desultory narrative that renders the loneliness of America right. These lyrics, joyful in their saying, strive to be clear. Clear language and clear thought are harder to pull off in poetry where obfuscation is taken for brilliance. These poems speak about love and the absence of love, family and the absence of family. The poems I selected I wanted to read again. We have been living in extremity and loss. While I sifted through the stacks, nine thousand people died in Jackson Heights from Covid19, including the priest in the parish where I now work. In such times, clarity I value. In such times, one wonders what matters. Poetry matters. These poems matter. "Mud Pies," "Velvet," "Listening to Symphony No. 7, Rondo Finale, After Reading Henry-Louis de la Grange," and "Shiloh Redux" are inventive and eccentric poems, the language springs from the page, coiled in unusual thought about gender and music and insects. The poems rollick in their sounds. I went back to them again. Yeats: "Do not wait to strike 'til the iron is hot; but make it hot by striking." These poems struck me. Read these new poets. Their new poems comfort as we remerge from unforgettable days. They are hot.

Spencer Reece

Wildlife

by Heather Treseler, Newton Center MA

All strut and gibbering, wattles and caruncles,
tom turkeys parade at dusk, panoply
of feathers fanned, snoods

engorged and dangling over their sharpened
beaks while their heads turn from red
to white to blue in tricolor

blush, pulsing placards above their sexual taxis.
Hens, loitering in shade, graze acorns
and the occasional grub, an eye

cocked, nonplussed. They've seen this all before.
Ben Franklin thought the fowl "vain
& silly" but respectable, more

American than the thieving eagle. Hens sense
that courtship, like government, rarely
is as dainty as ballet of bowerbirds.

And of the preening toms? Who hasn't felt
the need to wear a brighter face for love
or war? At dusk, they flock

to the wooded edge of town. (And mate, quietly,
on ground.) Then, one-by-one, take running
starts, wings pumping,

and like battered 747s ascend to perch on spiky
feet, nestling along limbs longer than
their own. Small miracle, how

they vault their twenty pounds of poult in air
as after a day of too many hours:
uphill, the last set of stairs.

Galliformes, sharp-sighted by day, are night blind
prey. My predator is my dark. After love,
I, too, sleep on a second story.

Check's, Almost Every Night

by Anna Knowles, Littleton CO

The days hang under Kentucky's heavy storms.
 Sky, a silver shifting smog. Rain-splotched backyards.
 This is where my kin sing back to the dead.
 After funerals and foreclosures, after bad news
 and long labor, we prophesize over Miller Light
 and three-dollar chili served in paper bowls.
 My grandmother shuffles in the corner
 with a man that only responds to his karaoke name.
 His spurs clamber like toy trains as she spins
 my way, eyebrows smudged and a smile wide
 as a broom, *Cash wants to take me on a cruise!*
 After Laverne passed, aunt Janet propped
 carnations along the salt-specked tables.
 They drooped on thin stalks. Grandma Marilyn
 unfurled Laverne's lace tablecloth and the edges
 kicked by the door like a pair of bare legs.
 Another year, uncle Don waltzed in with an unlit
 candelabra, drove it down the middle of the bar,
 pretending the candles were lit as evening threw down.
 Tonight, James behind the bar wears a metal cross
 that hangs down to his belly button. Yellow rose
 for a microphone, he winks a glaucous eye.
 In a sideways-two step he sings a country-western
 classic. Just months ago, he was on his knees
 in the deep baritone of *My Achy Break-y Heart*
 for my sister while she blushed in a barstool.
 Not everyone likes it here. A LED neon sign
 flashes orange, stuns the windows as afternoon
 drunks come and go through the smoky dark.
 Loose chatter forms around the best deal at Kroger.
 Sudden intimacies are made. Heads lean into sweat-
 lined necks that smell of Pall Mall. A Courier-Journal
 framed on the wall calls this *The place that time forgot.*
 Time wheels its wrought-iron web, redeems us all.
 Meanwhile, pity-slickened years drape servicemen
 along the edge of happiness yet to arrive.
 They hang around anyway, drinking over red baskets
 with their wives. I know I've romanticized the place,
 lost in the specter of my great grandparents
 doing the same shit in the Eisenhower years.
 I can summon them up. They come from
 the hope I was honed in. I can almost lean
 into it, close enough to hear the rustling layers
 of their clothes decades ago. As if I could tent
 the sweat-drenched shirt from Bud's back,
 curl the crimp of Laverne's rosy globe of hair
 around my finger and hear it set. Through
 that malt-mired layer between here and there,
 someone drives over the tracks going fifty.
 The crack of a beer can opens at the far corner.
 No one wants to go home.

Mud Pies

by Catherine Marengi, Wareham MA

I mined riches from the earth: clumps of green
mosses, plush as tufted velvet, laid in sheets
and cut to perfect circles with an overturned
flowerpot, edges trimmed with Queen Anne's lace,
studded with the regal purple jewels of elderberry,
beaded trim of wild grapes with pearly frost,
topped with white down pulled from milkweed
pods, as fine as any ermine.

My father didn't want me to have dirt beneath
my fingernails, as he and all who came before him did.
He made me scrub the black crescent moons
that crowned my fingertips.

He died thinking he had failed me. Never bought
the twinkling plastic toys or patent-leather shoes
he thought I wanted. Never knew how much I loved
my denim overalls, my canvas sneakers caked in
mud.

I didn't know it then. The grownup world is split in two:
Those who work the soil, and those who own it.
The soft earth tried to break the news to me gently.

Velvet

By Diana M. Chien, Winchester MA

If I wore a velvet coat, with peacock tails
If I wore a velvet coat with high black boots,
a feathered hat, a saber, a swagger, a stroll,
a loll, a dapper and sprawl –

Guns, acrid query
of gun-smoke, a quip
A shiny whip
A wink
A long nose, a longer smile

– In short if I were a man
of the kind
books made me want to be –
finer than any sloven stubbled slob,
wickeder than any woman,
more subtly perfumed,
darker presence in a room, certainly
and most lovely of all, o
better, better than me –

Bloody-lipped Dionysus in the flesh
Devil-shined, palmed cards, brocade vest
Manhood and girlhood and foxhood
Always-boy and maybe-woman and fox-hooded

O to be the keenest on the scent.
O to have the flesh that heaven ought have sent.
O take from me this sweet-acid want.

*Listening to Symphony No. 7, Rondo
Finale, After Reading Henry-Louis
de La Grange*

by Richard Foerster, Eliot ME

Perhaps it *is* radiant dawn I'm meant
to hear and not some "apotheosis
of self-destruction," with its "disordered
accumulation" of timpani and bells
that my iPod's earbuds now blossom with,
flooding the late light of my living room
where I sit over Spaten beers, Mahler's
favorite, companionably drinking, just
the two of us, I imagine, until
the coda announces the coming end
to the cacophony of our squealing
barroom laughter over some bawdy joke,
our boozed-up voices morphed into trumpets
and drums thundering a defiant joy
above the world's tumultuous troubles,
"suspended and brought into question," here,
rocketing toward a silence lavish with
chaotic light, this "vertiginous
complexity," pouring forth from the brain
of a man I'm kissing full on the lips
inside this raucous space, which I've cranked up
to a near deafening blast of decibels
to lift me on its blaze.

Shiloh Redux

Necrophila americana
(American carrion beetle)

By E.R. Lutken, St. Joseph LA

Feral April, haunt of blossoming wounds,
cannon thunder, pattering bullet showers.
Sweet petrichor lured burying beetles along
roaming like bees, flower to crimson flower.
In meadow, blushing forest, split fence-rows,
profusion of fresh-dead yank and secesh,
lilac and blue caps nestled in new grass.
Precious sons with drizzle-dampened brows,
their limp hair hovering in rough wind gusts,
knots of flies droned near dull eyes at hushed
pause between mortar roar and muzzle flash.

In gathering dark, rain babbled notes of even-
song, grubs burrowed into cooling flesh,
knitting green swards from tangled violet veins.
Fervid crows assiduously undressed
youthful bodies groomed for ageless sleep.
Blood-tinged pools mirrored scudding clouds, low
sweep of swallows skimmed the lone log church.
Rafts of industrious nematodes dove deep
into bayonet tracks, inched through viscous flow
of purple gore altered to angel's glow,
lanterns that lit the belly of the marsh.

Years trickle down through bramble-choked ravines,
ages for verdant earth to grow new skin.
Still, underneath, bitter bones twist, uneasy
skulls shake at sharp report of rebuilt guns.
Cold, callow bronze and marble sentries
wear vacant stares unfazed by beetles' jaws.
Bleached gravestones canted by harsh centuries
hold like clinched teeth to genteel lawn's veneer.
Winter denies surrender to spring thaw.
Redoubts scrape evening's tattered, red skies raw.
Sap drips from palisades in amber tears.

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, and raised in Minneapolis, poet **Spencer Reece** earned a BA at Wesleyan University, an MA at the University of York, an MTS at Harvard Divinity School, and an MDiv at Yale Divinity School. He was ordained in the Episcopal Church in 2011. Reece's debut collection of poetry, *The Clerk's Tale* (2004), was chosen for the Bakeless Poetry Prize by Louise Glück and adapted into a short film by director James Franco. He is also the author of the collection *The Road to Emmaus* (2013), which was a longlist nominee for the National Book Award. His honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, grants from the Fulbright Foundation and the Minnesota State Arts Council, a Witter Bynner fellowship from the Library of Congress, and the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship. He currently is pastor at a church in Jackson Heights, New York City.

Heather Treseler's *Parturition* (2020) received the international poetry chapbook prize from the Munster Literature Centre in Ireland and the Jean Pedrick Chapbook Prize from the New England Poetry Club. Her poems appear (or are forthcoming) in *Cincinnati Review*, *Harvard Review*, *PN Review*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The American Scholar*, among other journals. Her sequence "The Lucie Odes" received *The Missouri Review's* Editors' Prize in 2019, and her poem "Louisiana Requiem" received Frontier Poetry's summer prize in 2018. Her essays appear in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *PN Review*, *Boston Review*, and in eight books about American poetry. She is an associate professor of English at Worcester State University and a Resident Scholar at the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center.

Anna Leigh Knowles is the author of *Conditions of The Wounded* (forthcoming, University of Wisconsin Press 2021), selected by Natasha Trethewey. Her work appears in *Blackbird*, *Indiana Review*, *Memorious*, *The Missouri Review Online*, *Poetry Northwest*, *RHINO*, *storySouth*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Sou'wester*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, and Tin House Online. A recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Agency Award, she has also received scholarships from the Appalachian Writers' Workshop, the San Miguel de Allende Writers' Conference, and a Female Leadership Residency at Omega Institution. She worked as an assistant editor for the literary journals *Copper Nickel* and *Crab Orchard Review*. She holds an MFA from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and a BA from University of Colorado-Denver.

A native of Massachusetts, the granddaughter of Italian immigrants, **Catherine Marengi** is the author of *Breaking Bread: Poems* (Finishing Line Press, 2020). She received first-place honors in separate contests judged by acclaimed poets Richard Blanco and Jennifer Clement. Her poems also twice received first-place honors from the Academy of American Poets University and College Poetry Prize program. Her work has appeared in *Ekphrastic Review*, *High Shelf Press*, *Bangalore Review*, *Cider Press Review*, *Sisyphus*, *Peregrine Journal*, *Crossroads*, *Solamente en San Miguel*, *Italian Americana*, *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*, *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, and *Conclave*. She also authored *Glad Farm: A Memoir* (Tate Publishing, 2016), a story of stark poverty and resilience, set on a former gladiolus farm (President Jimmy Carter called it "inspiring"). She holds an M.A., B.A. summa cum laude in English from Tufts University, where she studied with Denise Levertov and X.J. Kennedy. She currently divides her time between Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Diana M. Chien's poetry and fiction have appeared in publications including *Tin House*, *Boulevard*, *the Boston Review*, *the American Reader*, *VOLT*, and *Web Conjunctions*. Her work has received awards from the *Atlantic Monthly* and others. She holds a certificate in creative writing from Princeton University and a Ph.D. in microbiology from MIT, where she directs the Communication Lab, a science communication program.

Richard Foerster was born in the Bronx, New York, the son of German immigrants, and holds degrees in English literature from Fordham College and the University of Virginia. He is the author of eight poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Boy on a Doorstep: New and Selected Poems* (Tiger Bark Press, 2019), which received the 2020 Poetry by the Sea Book Award. Honors include the "Discovery"/The Nation Award, *Poetry* magazine's Bess Hokin Prize, a Maine Arts Commission Fellowship, the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, two National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowships and two Maine Literary Awards for Poetry. His work has appeared in such magazines and anthologies as *The Best American Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Boulevard*, *The Southern Review*, and *Poetry*. He has worked as a lexicographer, educational writer, typesetter, teacher, and editor of the literary magazines *Chelsea* and *Chautauqua Literary Journal*. He lives in a former Nazarene church on the coast of southern Maine.

E. R. Lutken worked as a physician for many years, the majority of that time on the Navajo Nation. After that, she taught middle and high school science and math in rural Colorado for several more years. Now she spends time writing poetry, and fishing in the swamps of Louisiana.